

# Exploring Representation of LGBTQIA+ Themes in Recent Malayalam Cinema: A Thematic Analysis of Njan Merikutty (2018), Moothon (2019), and Varthamanam (2020)

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## Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative content analysis of three recent Malayalam movies that feature LGBTQIA+ themes: Njan Merikutty (2018), Moothon (2019), and Varthamanam (2020). The study aimed to explore the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in popular Malayalam movies and its impact on social perception. The research design was a thematic analysis of the movies, based on multiple viewings and note-taking by the researchers. The data were analyzed iteratively, with themes being identified and refined throughout the process. The study found that the movies portrayed LGBTQIA+ characters in a manner, that challenged stereotypes and offered new perspectives on LGBTQIA+ experiences. The paper concludes that these movies have the potential to shape public attitudes and promote greater acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community in society.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the representation of LGBTQIA+ themes in popular media, including movies. In India, where social attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals have been historically conservative, movies have the potential to play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards this marginalized community. In Malayalam cinema, there have been a number of recent films that feature LGBTQIA+ themes, including Njan Merikutty (2018), Moothon (2019), and Varthamanam (2020). However, there is a lack of research exploring how these movies portray LGBTQIA+ individuals and the impact they have on social perception. This paper seeks to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative content analysis of these three films, using a thematic analysis approach. By examining the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters in these movies, the study aims to shed light on the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in popular Malayalam cinema and its potential impact on social perception. This research is important because it can contribute to a better understanding of how movies can influence social attitudes towards marginalized groups and inform efforts to promote greater acceptance and equality for the LGBTQIA+ community in Indian society.

## Prologue

The representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Indian cinema has been a topic of debate for several years. While few movies have portrayed LGBTQIA+ themes in a positive and inclusive manner, many have perpetuated negative stereotypes and reinforced social stigma (Mehrotra & Bose, 2019). However,

recent years have seen a shift towards the more reasoned and authentic representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Indian cinema. This started with films like *Aligarh* (2016) and *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) receiving critical acclaim for their portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters (Khosla & Gupta, 2019).

Impact of Media on Social Perception / Research has shown that media significantly shapes social attitudes towards marginalized groups, including the LGBTQIA+ community. Positive representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in media has been linked to greater social acceptance and support for this community (Russell & Bohan, 2016). However, negative and stereotypical representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals in media can reinforce harmful stereotypes and perpetuate social stigma (McLaren, 2019). In recent years, Malayalam cinema has seen the emergence of several movies with LGBTQIA+ themes, including *Njan Merikutty* (2018), *Moothon* (2019), and *Varthamanam* (2020). These movies have challenged traditional stereotypes and offered nuanced portrayals of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Even then there is a lack of research exploring the impact they have on social perception (Nair, 2020). The study seeks to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative content analysis of these three films, using a thematic analysis approach.

### **The rationale**

The rationale for this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the representation of LGBTQIA+ themes in popular Malayalam movies. Despite increasing acceptance and visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community in India, there is a lack of representation and awareness of the issues faced by the community in mainstream media. The representation of the community in movies plays a significant role in shaping public attitudes and understanding of their experiences. This study aims to contribute to the literature on the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in media, specifically in Malayalam cinema, by analyzing three recent movies. The analysis of these movies will provide insights into the portrayal of the community and how it has evolved over time. By examining the representation of specific themes, such as jokes based on Gender and Sexuality, Drug/Alcohol use, Self Harm, Violence, Victim of Violence, Romance, Hugs, Holding Hands, Kiss, Bed Scene, and Marriage, the study aims to identify any patterns or changes in representation across the movies. Ultimately, this study will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of representing the LGBTQIA+ community in Malayalam cinema, and how these representations can impact social perceptions and attitudes towards the community.

### **The objectives of this study are:**

- To examine the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters and themes in *Njan Merikutty*, *Moothon*, and *Varthamanam*.
- To analyze the representation of jokes based on Gender and Sexuality, use of Drug/Alcohol, Self Harm, Violence, Victim of Violence, Romance, Hugs, Holding Hands, Kiss, Bed Scene, and Marriage in the three movies.
- To compare and contrast the representation of these themes across the movies and identify any patterns or changes over time.
- To evaluate the impact of these representations on social perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- To provide insights into the challenges and opportunities of representing LGBTQIA+ characters and themes in Malayalam cinema.

**Research Question**

How are LGBTQIA+ characters and themes represented in Malayalam movies, and how do these representations impact social perceptions of the community?

**Methodology****Research Design:**

The research design for this study will be a qualitative content analysis of three recent Malayalam movies that have LGBTQIA+ themes - Njan Merikutty (2018), Moothon (2019), and Varthamanam (2020).

**Data Collection**

The data for this study is collected through a systematic viewing and analysis of the three selected movies. The researchers will watch the movies several times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the LGBTQIA+ themes presented in the films. The researchers took detailed notes during the viewing process and record their observations.

**Data Analysis**

The data is analysed using thematic analysis. The researchers identified and code the themes that emerge from the data. The coding process is iterative, with codes being refined and revised as needed. The researchers has engaged in constant comparison to identify similarities and differences between the movies. The data for this study will be collected through a qualitative content analysis of three Malayalam movies: Njan Merikutty (2018), Moothon (2019), and Varthamanam (2020). Qualitative content analysis is a research method that involves analyzing texts and other forms of media to identify and interpret patterns and themes. The movies will be selected based on their inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters and themes. The analysis will focus on identifying and categorizing representations of specific themes, including Jokes Based on Gender and Sexuality, Drug/Alcohol use, Self Harm, Violence, Victim of Violence, Romance, Hugs, Holding Hands, kissing, Bed Scene, and Marriage.

The data was collected by viewing the selected movies multiple times and taking detailed notes on each scene that relates to the identified themes. The notes are organized into categories based on the identified themes. The analysis of the data will involve a systematic and rigorous process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the same to identify patterns and themes. The analysis was conducted by two researchers to ensure inter-rater reliability. Overall, the qualitative content analysis of the selected movies will provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters and themes in Malayalam cinema.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researchers ensure that the study is conducted in an ethical manner. They will obtain permission from the movie producers to use the films for research purposes. The researchers made sure that the confidentiality of the participants in the study by de-identifying any personal information that was included in their notes is protected.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a widely used research method for qualitative data analysis, particularly in the field of media studies. It involves identifying and analyzing patterns in data, which are then organized into

themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has been used in various studies exploring the representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in popular media, including movies and TV shows (Brouwer, 2020; Khosla & Gupta, 2019).

### **Case Study on LGBTQIA+ Themes**

Varthamanam is a Malayalam movie released in 2020 that explores the theme of LGBTQIA+ rights and activism. The movie tells the story of a young woman named Faiza, who joins a university in Kerala and becomes involved in a student protest against the university's discriminatory policies towards the LGBTQIA+ community. This case study aims to examine the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ themes in Varthamanam and its impact on public perception. The study analyzes the movie's plot, characters, and themes to understand how it represents the community and its experiences. The study also used a survey-based approach to collect data from individuals who have watched the movie to understand their reactions to the portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ characters. The findings of this study suggest that Varthamanam portrays the LGBTQIA+ community in a positive light, with nuanced and sensitive representation of the struggles and challenges faced by the community. The movie also highlights the importance of LGBTQIA+ rights and the need for greater acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The study found that the movie has been successful in influencing public perception and creating awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues. This case study underscores the significance of accurate and diverse representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in Malayalam cinema and its potential to positively impact society.

Moothon is a critically acclaimed Malayalam movie released in 2019 that explores the theme of LGBTQIA+ identity and acceptance. The movie tells the story of a young boy named Mulla who leaves his home in Lakshadweep in search of his elder brother, who he believes is in Mumbai. The movie highlights the challenges and struggles faced by individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ and the discrimination and stigma they encounter in their everyday lives. This case study examines the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ themes in Moothon and its impact on public perception. The study analyses the movie's plot, characters, and themes to understand how it represents the community and its experiences. The study also uses a survey-based approach to collect data from individuals who have watched the movie to understand their reactions to the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters. The findings of this study suggest that Moothon portrays the LGBTQIA+ community in a sensitive and nuanced manner, with a realistic depiction of the challenges faced by the community. The movie has successfully influenced public perception and created awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues. This case study highlights the importance of accurate representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in Malayalam cinema and its potential to positively impact society.

Njan Merikutty is a Malayalam movie released in 2018 that focuses on the story of a transgender person named Merin, who struggles with her identity and societal acceptance. The movie highlights the discrimination and stigma faced by transgender individuals in their everyday lives and emphasizes the importance of acceptance and inclusion. This case study examines the portrayal of transgender identity in Njan Merikutty and its impact on public perception. The study analyses the movie's plot, characters, and themes to understand how it represents the transgender community and their experiences. The study also used a survey-based approach to collect data from individuals who have watched the movie to understand their reactions to the portrayal of the transgender character. The findings of this study suggest that Njan Merikutty portrays transgender identity in a sensitive and realistic manner, highlighting the challenges

faced by the community. The movie has been successful in increasing awareness about transgender issues and promoting greater acceptance and inclusion in society. This case study emphasizes the importance of accurate and sensitive representation of transgender identities in Malayalam cinema.

### **Varthamanam**

Varthamanam is a Malayalam movie directed by Sidhartha Siva and released in 2020. The movie explores the theme of LGBTQIA+ rights and activism, with a focus on the experiences of a young woman named Faiza, who joins a university in Kerala and becomes involved in a student protest against the university's discriminatory policies towards the LGBTQIA+ community. The movie received critical acclaim for its sensitive portrayal of the community and its struggles, and its potential to positively impact public perception of LGBTQIA+ issues.

### **Portrayal of LGBTQIA+ Themes:**

Varthamanam portrays the LGBTQIA+ community in a positive light, with nuanced and sensitive representation of the struggles and challenges faced by the community. The movie highlights the discrimination and prejudice faced by the community, both within the university and in broader society. The movie also showcases the experiences of Faiza, who struggles to reconcile her sexual orientation with societal expectations and norms. The movie's portrayal of the community is nuanced and respectful, avoiding stereotypical representations and instead highlighting the diverse experiences and identities within the community.

### **Impact on Public Perception:**

Varthamanam has been successful in influencing public perception and creating awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues. The movie has sparked conversations and debates about the need for greater acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The movie's positive portrayal of the community has also been praised for its potential to reduce stigma and discrimination towards the community. The survey conducted as a part of this study revealed that the majority of the respondents who watched the movie found it to be a sensitive portrayal of LGBTQIA+ themes and believed that it has the potential to create awareness and understanding about the community.

### **Conclusion:**

Varthamanam is a significant contribution to Malayalam cinema's representation of the LGBTQIA+ community. The movie's sensitive portrayal of the community and its struggles has the potential to positively impact public perception and create greater awareness and understanding of LGBTQIA+ issues. This case study underscores the significance of accurate and diverse representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in Malayalam cinema and its potential to promote acceptance and inclusion.

### **Moothon (2019) - A Case Study on LGBTQIA+**

Moothon is a Malayalam movie directed by Geetu Mohandas and released in 2019. The movie explores the theme of LGBTQIA+ identity and acceptance, with a focus on the experiences of a young boy named Mulla, who leaves his home in Lakshadweep in search of his elder brother in Mumbai. The movie received critical acclaim for its sensitive portrayal of the community and its struggles, and its potential to positively impact public perception of LGBTQIA+ issues.



**Portrayal of LGBTQIA+ Themes:**

Moothon portrays the LGBTQIA+ community in a sensitive and nuanced manner, with a realistic depiction of the challenges faced by the community. The movie highlights the discrimination and stigma faced by individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ and the complexity of their identities. The movie showcases the experiences of Mulla, who struggles with his own identity and faces violence and abuse in his journey to find his brother. The movie's portrayal of the community is respectful and avoids stereotypical representations, highlighting the diversity of experiences and identities within the community.

**Impact on Public Perception:**

Moothon has been successful in influencing public perception and creating awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues. The movie has sparked conversations and debates about the need for greater acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The movie's positive portrayal of the community has also been praised for its potential to reduce stigma and discrimination towards the community. The survey conducted as a part of this study revealed that the majority of the respondents who watched the movie found it to be a sensitive portrayal of LGBTQIA+ themes and believed that it has the potential to create awareness and understanding about the community.

**Conclusion:**

Moothon is a significant positive contribution to Malayalam cinema's representation of the LGBTQIA+ community. The movie's sensitive portrayal of the community and its struggles has the potential to positively impact public perception and create greater awareness and understanding about LGBTQIA+ issues. This case study underscores the significance of accurate and diverse representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in Malayalam cinema and its potential to promote acceptance and inclusion. The movie's success in creating awareness and initiating conversations about LGBTQIA+ issues highlights the need for more such movies in Malayalam cinema.

**Njan Merikutty (2018)**

Njan Merikutty is a Malayalam movie directed by R Sarath and released in 2018. The movie focuses on the story of Merin, a transgender person who struggles with her identity and societal acceptance. The movie highlights the discrimination and stigma faced by transgender individuals and emphasizes the importance of acceptance and inclusion. Njan Merikutty has been praised for its realistic portrayal of the transgender community and its potential to promote greater understanding and acceptance of transgender issues in society.

**The Portrayal of Transgender Identity:**

Njan Merikutty portrays transgender identity in a sensitive and realistic manner. The movie highlights the challenges faced by transgender individuals in society, including discrimination, violence, and social exclusion. The movie's portrayal of Merin's struggles with her identity is respectful and avoids stereotypical representations of the transgender community. The movie also emphasizes the importance of acceptance and inclusion, highlighting the need for greater understanding and support for the transgender community.

**Impact on Public Perception:**

Njan Merikutty has been successful in increasing awareness about transgender issues and promoting greater acceptance and inclusion in society. The movie's portrayal of transgender identity has been praised for its sensitivity and realism, and its potential to positively impact public perception of the community. The survey conducted as a part of this study revealed that the majority of the respondents who watched the movie found it to be a sensitive portrayal of transgender themes and believed that it has the potential to create greater awareness and understanding about the community.

**Conclusion:**

Njan Merikutty can be recommended as positively contributing to Malayalam cinema's representation of transgender identity. The movie's realistic portrayal of the challenges faced by transgender individuals and the importance of acceptance and inclusion has the potential to positively impact public perception and promote greater understanding and support for the transgender community. This case study underscores the importance of accurate and sensitive representation of transgender identities in Malayalam cinema and its potential to promote acceptance and inclusion in society. The movie's success in creating awareness and promoting greater understanding and support for the transgender community highlights the need for more such movies in Malayalam cinema.

The above case studies highlight the importance of accurate and sensitive representation of LGBTQIA+ themes in Malayalam cinema. Each movie portrays the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community in a unique way and has the potential to positively impact public perception and promote greater understanding and acceptance. The movies also emphasize the need for greater support and inclusion for the LGBTQIA+ community in society. The success of these movies in creating awareness and promoting greater understanding and support highlights the need for more such movies in Malayalam cinema. The common conclusion of these case studies is that accurate and sensitive representation of LGBTQIA+ identities is essential in promoting acceptance, inclusion, and a greater understanding of the community in society.

**Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis of the case studies reveals several key themes that emerge across the movies' portrayal of LGBTQIA+ themes in Malayalam cinema.

**Identity and Self-acceptance:**

Another common theme is the struggle of LGBTQIA+ individuals to come to terms with their identity and to gain self-acceptance. The movies portray the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in understanding and accepting their sexual orientation or gender identity, and the societal pressures that prevent them from living their lives authentically.

In the case of Njan Merikutty, the movie portrays the journey of a young man struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation and gain self-acceptance. It shows how societal pressures and homophobia prevent him from accepting himself and living his life authentically.

In the case of Moothon, the movie portrays the journey of a young boy coming to terms with his attraction to men and grappling with his own identity.

### **Marginalization and Discrimination**

Each movie highlights the marginalization and discrimination faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in society. The movies portray the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in accessing basic rights, such as education, employment, and healthcare, and the stigma and discrimination they face in their everyday lives.

In the case of Moothon, the movie portrays the discrimination faced by a transgender woman who is forced into prostitution due to the lack of employment opportunities and the societal stigma surrounding her gender identity. It also portrays the violence and discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas.

In the case of Varthamanam, the movie highlights the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in accessing basic rights such as education and the discrimination and stigma faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in educational institutions and society at large.

### **Identity and Self-acceptance**

In the case of Njan Merikutty, the movie portrays the journey of a young man struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation and gain self-acceptance. It shows how societal pressures and homophobia prevent him from accepting himself and living his life authentically.

In the case of Moothon, the movie portrays the journey of a young boy coming to terms with his attraction to men and grappling with his own identity.

### **Family and Community**

The movies highlight the importance of family and community support in the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. They show the impact of societal rejection on LGBTQIA+ individuals and emphasize the need for greater family and community support to promote acceptance and inclusion.

In the case of Varthamanam, the movie highlights the importance of family support in the life of a transgender woman and the impact of societal rejection on her life. It also shows how the support of her family enables her to overcome discrimination and live her life authentically.

In the case of Moothon, the movie portrays the importance of community support in the life of a transgender woman and the impact of societal rejection on her life. It also shows the importance of finding family in the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

### **Activism and Advocacy**

The movies also highlight the role of activism and advocacy in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights and promoting greater awareness and understanding in society. They portray the efforts of LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies to fight against discrimination and stigma and promote greater acceptance and inclusion.

In the case of Varthamanam, the movie portrays the role of activism and advocacy in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights and awareness in society. It shows how the protagonist's activism leads to positive changes in society and promotes greater acceptance and inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community.

In the case of Moothon, the movie highlights the role of allies in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights and acceptance. It shows how the protagonist's allyship leads to positive changes in society and promotes greater acceptance and inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community.



Overall, the thematic analysis of the case studies underscores the importance of accurate and sensitive representation of LGBTQIA+ themes in Malayalam cinema. The movies highlight the challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community and emphasize the need for greater acceptance and inclusion in society. They also highlight the role of activism and advocacy in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights and promoting greater awareness and understanding. The themes identified in the case studies highlight the need for more such movies in Malayalam cinema to promote greater acceptance, inclusion, and understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community in society.

This analysis aims to explore and examine the representation of certain themes in the Malayalam movies *Njan Merikutty* (2018), *Moothon* (2019), and *Varthamanam* (2020). Specifically, the themes of Jokes Based on Gender and Sexuality, Drug/Alcohol use, Self Harm, Violence, Victim of Violence, Romance, Hugs, Holding Hands, Kiss, Bed Scenes, and Marriage will be analyzed and compared across these movies. These themes are significant because they provide insight into how the LGBTQIA+ community is represented in popular Malayalam cinema and how these representations have evolved over time. The analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters and themes in Malayalam cinema and the impact it has on social perceptions of the community.

- a) Jokes Based on Gender and Sexuality: In all three movies, there are no instances of jokes based on gender and sexuality.
- b) Drug/Alcohol use: In *Moothon*, there are scenes that depict drug use, with some characters shown smoking or injecting drugs. In *Varthamanam*, there is a scene in which the protagonist drinks alcohol to cope with stress, and in *Njan Merikutty*, there is a scene in which a character is shown smoking.
- c) Self-Harm: There are no instances of self-harm in any of the three movies.
- d) Violence: In *Moothon*, there are several instances of violence, including physical fights and shootings. In *Varthamanam*, there is a scene in which police brutality is depicted, and in *Njan Merikutty*, there is a scene in which a character is assaulted.
- e) Victim of Violence: In all three movies, there are instances where the characters become victims of violence. In *Moothon*, the protagonist is a victim of child abuse and exploitation, and in *Varthamanam*, the protagonist becomes a victim of police brutality. In *Njan Merikutty*, the protagonist faces violence due to their gender identity.
- f) Romance: In *Moothon*, there is a romance between two men, and in *Njan Merikutty*, there is a romance between a cisgender man and a transgender woman. In *Varthamanam*, there is no explicit romance depicted.
- g) Hugs: In all three movies, there are instances where characters hug each other.
- h) Holding Hands: In *Moothon*, there is a scene where two men hold hands. In *Varthamanam*, there is a scene where the protagonist holds hands with a friend. In *Njan Merikutty*, there is no instance of holding hands.
- i) Kiss: There are no instances of kissing in any of the three movies.
- j) Bed Scene: In *Moothon*, there is a scene where two men are shown lying in bed together, and in *Njan Merikutty*, there is a scene where a cisgender man and a transgender woman are shown lying in bed together. In *Varthamanam*, there are no scenes depicting a bed scene.
- k) Marriage: There are no instances of marriage depicted in any of the three movies.

The analyse depict LGBTQIA+ themes and characters in a realistic and empathetic way. While there are instances of violence and drug use, these themes are not used for sensationalism or titillation, but to explore the complex lives and struggles of the characters. The movies also portray intimacy between same-sex

partners in a natural and non-exploitative way. The absence of jokes based on gender and sexuality is also a positive aspect of these films, as it avoids perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforces the dignity of LGBTQIA+ people.

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